

The BLACK BOX

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Novelized from the Photo Play of the Same Name. Produced by the Universal Film Manufacturing Company.

SYNOPSIS.

Sanford Quest, master criminologist of the world, finds that in bringing to Justice MacDougal, the murderer of Lord Ashleigh's daughter, he has but just begun a life-and-death struggle with a mysterious master criminal. In a hidden but in Professor Ashleigh's garden he has seen an anthropoid ape skeleton and a living inhuman creature, half monkey, half man, destroyed by fire. In his rooms have appeared from nowhere black boxes, one containing diamonds torn from a lovely throat by a pair of armless, threatening hands; both with sarcastic, threatening notes, signed by the inscrutable hands. His valet, Ross Brown, and a caller, Miss Quigg, are murdered in his rooms. Laura and Lenora, his assistants, suspect Craig, the professor's valet. Lenora was imprisoned, and loses him yet again after a thrilling chase. The black boxes continue to appear in uncanny fashion, with their notes of sarcasm, warning or a suggestion of clues, all signed by the inhuman, armless hands.

EIGHTH INSTALLMENT

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE INHERITED SIN.

"Getting kind of used to these court-house shows, aren't you, Lenora?" Quest remarked, as they stepped from the automobile and entered the house in Georgia square.

"Could anyone feel much sympathy," she asked, "with those men? Red Gallagher, as they all called him, is more like a great brutal animal than a human being. I think that even if they had sentenced him to death I should have felt that it was quite the proper thing to have done."

"Too much sentiment about those things," Quest agreed, clipping the end off a cigar. "Men like that are better off the face of the earth. They did their best to send me there."

"Here's a cablegram for you," Lenora exclaimed, bringing it over to him. "Mr. Quest, I wonder if it's from Scotland Yard?"

Quest tore it open. They read it together, Lenora standing on tiptoe to peer over his shoulder.

"Stowaway answering in every respect your description of Craig found on Durham. Has been arrested, as desired, and will be taken to Hamblin house for identification by Lord Ashleigh. Reply whether you are coming over, and full details as to charge."

"Good for Scotland Yard!" Quest declared. "So they've got him, eh? All the same, that fellow's as slippery as an eel. Lenora, how should you like a trip across the ocean, eh?"

"I should love it," Lenora replied. "Do you mean it, really?"

Quest nodded.

"That fellow fooled me pretty well," he continued, "but somehow I feel that if I get my hands on him this time, they'll stay there till he stands where Red Gallagher did today. I don't feel content to let anyone else finish off the job. Got any relatives over there?"

"I have an aunt in London," Lenora told him, "the dearest old lady you ever saw. She'd give anything to have me make her a visit."

Quest moved across to his desk and took up a sailing list. He studied it for a few moments and turned back to Lenora.

"Send a cable off at once to Scotland Yard," he directed. "Say—Am sailing on Lusitania tomorrow. Hold prisoner. Charge very serious. Have full warrants."

Lenora wrote down the message and went to the telephone to send it off. As soon as she had finished Quest took up his hat again.

"Come on," he invited. "The machine's outside. We'll just go and look in on the professor and tell him the news. Poor old chap, I'm afraid he'll never be the same man again."

They found the professor on his hands and knees upon a dusty floor. Carefully arranged before him were the bones of a skeleton, each laid in some appointed place.

"What about that unhappy man, Craig?" the professor asked, gloomily. "Isn't the Durham almost due now?"

Quest took out the cablegram from his pocket and passed it over. The professor's fingers trembled a little as he read it. He passed it back, however, without immediate comment.

"You see, they have been cleverer over there than we were," Quest remarked.

"Perhaps," the professor assented. "They seem, at least, to have arrested the man. Even now I can scarcely believe that it is Craig—my servant Craig—who is lying in an English prison. Do you know that his people have been servants in the Ashleigh family for some hundreds of years?"

Quest was clearly interested. "Say, I'd like to hear about that!" he exclaimed. "You know I'm rather great on heredity, professor. What class did he come from then? Were his people just domestic servants always?"

The professor's face was for a moment troubled. He moved to his desk, rummaged about for a time, and finally produced an ancient volume.

"This really belongs to my brother, Lord Ashleigh," he explained. "He brought it over with him to show me

some entries concerning which I was interested. It contains a history of the Hamblin estate since the days of Cromwell, and here in the back, you see, is a list of our farmers, bailiffs and domestic servants. There was a Craig who was a tenant of the first Lord Ashleigh and fought with him in the Cromwellian wars as a trooper and since those days, so far as I can see, there has never been a time when there hasn't been a Craig in the service of our family. A fine race they seem to have been, until—"

"Until when?" Quest demanded.

The look of trouble had once more clouded the professor's face. He shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"Until Craig's father," he admitted. "I am afraid I must admit that we came upon a bad piece of family history here. Silas Craig entered the service of my father in 1858, as under gamekeeper. Here we come upon the first black mark against the name. He appears to have lived reputably for some years, and then, after a quarrel with a neighbor about some trivial matter, he deliberately murdered him, a crime for which he was tried and executed in 1867. John Craig, his only son, entered our service in 1880, and, when I left England, accompanied me as my valet."

There was a moment's silence.

"Lenora and I are sailing tomorrow," Quest said. "We are taking over the necessary warrants and shall bring Craig back here for trial."

The professor smoked thoughtfully for some moments. Then he rose deliberately to his feet. He had come to a decision. He announced it calmly, but irrevocably.

"I shall come with you," he announced. "I shall be glad to visit England, but apart from that I feel it to be my duty. I owe it to Craig to see that he has a fair chance, and I owe it to the law to see that he pays the penalty, if indeed, he is guilty of these crimes. Is Miss Laura accompanying you, too?"

Quest shook his head.

"From what the surgeons tell us," he said, "it will be some weeks before she is able to travel. At the same time, I must tell you that I am glad of your decision, professor."

"It is my duty," the latter declared. "I cannot rest in this state of uncertainty. If Craig is lost to me, the sooner I face the fact the better. At the same time I will be frank with you. Notwithstanding all the accumulated pile of evidence I feel in my heart the urgent necessity of seeing him face to face, of holding him by the shoulders and asking him whether these things are true. We have faced death together, Craig and I. We have done more than that—we have courted it. There is nothing about him I can accept from hearsay. I shall go with you to England, Mr. Quest."

CHAPTER XIX.

The professor rose from his seat in some excitement as the carriage passed through the great gates of Hamblin park. He acknowledged with a smile the respectful curtsy of the woman who held it open.

"You have now an opportunity, my dear Mr. Quest," he said, "of appreciating one feature of English life not entirely reproducible in your own wonderful country. I mean the home life and surroundings of our aristocracy. You see these oak trees?"

He went on, with a little wave of his hand. "They were planted by my ancestors in the days of Henry VIII. I have been a student of tree life in South America and in the dense forests of central Africa, but for real character, for splendor of growth and hardness, there is nothing in the world to touch the Ashleigh oaks."

"They're some trees," the criminologist admitted.

"You notice, perhaps, the small ones, which seem dwarfed. Their tops were cut off by the lord of Ashleigh on the day that Lady Jane Grey was beheaded. Queen Elizabeth heard of it and threatened to confiscate the estate. Look at the turf, my friend. Ages have gone to the making of that mossy, velvet carpet."

"Where's the house?" Quest inquired.

"A mile farther on yet. The woods part and make a natural avenue past the bend of the river there," the professor pointed out. "Full of trout, that river, Quest. How I used to whip that stream when I was a boy!"

They swept presently round a bend in the avenue. Before them on the hillside surrounded by trees and with a great walled garden behind, was Hamblin house. Quest gave vent to a little exclamation of wonder as he looked at it.

"This is where you've got us beat, sure," he admitted. "Our country places are like gewgaw palaces compared to this. Makes me kind of sorry," he went on regretfully, "that I didn't bring Lenora along."

The professor shook his head.

"You were very wise," he said. "My

brother and Lady Ashleigh have recovered from the shock of poor Lena's death in a marvelous manner, I believe, but the sight of the girl might have brought it back to them. You have left her with friends, I hope, Mr. Quest?"

"She has an aunt in Hampstead," the latter explained. "I should have liked to see her safely there myself, but we should have been an hour or two later down here, and I tell you," he went on, his voice gathering a note almost of ferocity, "I'm wanting to get my hands on that fellow Craig! I wonder where they're holding him."

"At the local police station, I expect," the professor replied. "My brother is a magistrate, of course, and he would see that proper arrangements were made. There he is at the hall door."

The carriage drew up before the great front a moment or two later. Lord Ashleigh came forward with outstretched hands, the genial smile of the welcoming host upon his lips. In his manner, however, there was a distinct note of anxiety.

"Edgar, my dear fellow," he exclaimed, "I am delighted! Welcome back to your home! Mr. Quest, I am very happy to see you here. You have heard the news, of course?"

"We have heard nothing!" the professor replied.

"You didn't go to Scotland Yard?" Lord Ashleigh asked.

"We haven't been to London at all," Quest explained. "We got on the boat train at Plymouth, and your brother managed to induce one of the directors whom he saw on the platform to stop the train for us at Hamblin road. We only left the boat two hours ago. There's nothing wrong with Craig, is there?"

Lord Ashleigh motioned them to follow him.

"Please come this way," he invited. He led them across the hall—which, dimly lit and with its stained-glass windows, was almost like the nave of a cathedral—into the library beyond. He closed the door and turned around.

"I have bad news for you both," he announced. "Craig has escaped."

Neither the professor nor Quest betrayed any unusual surprise. So far as the latter was concerned, his first glimpse at Lord Ashleigh's face had warned him of what was coming.

"Dear me!" the professor murmured, sinking into an easy chair. "This is most unexpected!"

"We'll get him again," Quest declared quickly. "Can you let us have

ing. The horse shied, the wheel caught a great stone by the side of the road, and all four men were thrown out. The man to whom Craig was handcuffed was stunned, but Craig himself appears to have been unhurt. He stumbled up, took the key of the handcuffs from the pocket of the officer, undid them and slipped off into the undergrowth before either the groom or the other Scotland Yard man had recovered their senses. To cut a long story short, this was lost Thursday, and up till now not a single trace of the fellow has been discovered."

Quest rose abruptly to his feet.

"Say, I'd like to take this matter up right on the spot where Craig disappeared," he suggested. "Couldn't we do that?"

"By all means," Lord Ashleigh agreed, touching a bell. "We have several hours before we change for dinner. I will have a car round and take you to the spot."

The professor acquiesced readily, and very soon they stepped out of the automobile on to the side of a narrow road, looking very much as it had been described. Farther on, beyond a stretch of open common, they could see the smoke from the gypsy encampment. On their left-hand side was a stretch of absolutely wild country, bounded in the far distance by the gray stone wall of the park. Lord Ashleigh led the way through the thicket, talking as he went.

"Craig came along through here," he explained. "The groom and the Scotland Yard man who had been sitting by his side, followed him. They searched for an hour but found no trace of him at all. Then they returned to the house to make a report and get help. I will now show you how Craig first eluded them."

He led the way along a tangled path, doubled back, plunged into a little spinney and came suddenly to a small shed.

"This is an ancient gamekeeper's shelter," he explained; "built a long time ago and almost forgotten now. What Craig did, without doubt, was to hide in this. The Scotland Yard man who took the affair in hand found distinct traces here of recent occupation. That is how he made his first escape."

Quest nodded.

"Sure!" he murmured. "Well, now, what about your more extended search?"

"I am coming to that," Lord Ashleigh replied. "As Edgar will remember, no doubt, I have always kept a few bloodhounds in my kennels, and

as soon as we could get together one or two of the keepers and a few of the local constabulary, we started off again from here. The dogs brought us without a check to this shed, and stayed off again this way."

They walked another half mile across a reedy swamp. Every now and then they had to jump across a small dyke, and once they had to make a detour to avoid an osier bed. They came at last to the river.

"Now, I can show you exactly how that fellow put us off the scent here," their guide proceeded. "He seems to have picked up something, Edgar, in those South American trips of yours, for a cleverer thing I never saw. You see all these bulrushes everywhere—clouds of them all along the river?"

"We call them tules," Quest muttered. "Well?"

"When Craig arrived here," Lord Ashleigh continued, "he must have heard the baying of the dogs in the distance and he knew that the game was up unless he could put them off the scent. He cut a quantity of these bulrushes from a place a little farther behind those trees, then stepped boldly into the middle of the water, waded down to that spot where, as you see, the trees hang over, stood stock still and leaned them all around him. It was dusk when the chase reached the river bank, and I have no doubt the bulrushes presented quite a natural appearance. At any rate, although the dogs came without a check to the edge of the river, where he stopped off, they never picked the scent up again either on this side or the other.

We tried them for four or five hours before we took them home. The next morning, while the place was being thoroughly searched, we came upon the spot where these bulrushes had been cut down, and we found them drifting down the river."

Quest had lit a fresh cigar and was smoking vigorously.

"What astonishes me more than anything," he pronounced, as he stood looking over the desolate expanse of country, "is that when one comes face to face with the fellow he presents all the appearance of a nerveless and broken-down coward. Then all of a sudden there spring up these evidences of the most amazing, the most diabolical resource. . . . Who's this, Lord Ashleigh?"

The latter turned his head. An elderly man in a brown velvet suit, with gaiters and thick boots, raised his hat respectfully.

"This is my head keeper, Middleton," his master explained. "He was with us on the chase."

The professor shook hands heartily with the newcomer.

"Not a day older, Middleton!" he exclaimed. "So you are the man who has given us all this trouble, eh? This gentleman and I have come over from New York on purpose to lay hands on Craig."

"I am very sorry, sir," the man replied. "I wouldn't have fired my gun if I had known what the consequences were going to be, but them poaching devils that come round here rabbiting fairly send me furious, and that's a fact. It ain't that one grudges them a few rabbits, but my tame pheasants all run out here from the home wood, and I've seen feathers at the side of the road there that no fox nor stoat had nothing to do with. All the same, sir, I'm very sorry. He added, "to have been the cause of any inconvenience."

"It is rather worse than inconvenience, Middleton," the professor said, gravely. "The man who has escaped is one of the worst criminals of these days."

"He won't get far, sir," the gamekeeper remarked, with a little smile. "It's a wild bit of country, this, as I admit that men might search for weeks without finding anything, but those gentlemen from Scotland Yard, sir, if you'll excuse my making the remark, and hoping that this gentleman, as he added, looking at Quest, "is in no way connected with them—well, they don't know everything, and that's a fact."

"This gentleman is from the United States," Lord Ashleigh reminded him, "so your criticism doesn't affect him. By the bye, Middleton, I heard this morning that you'd been airing your opinion down in the village. You seem to rather fancy yourself as a thief-catcher."

"I wouldn't go so far as that, my lord," the man replied, respectfully, "but still, I hope I may say that I've as much common sense as most people. You see, sir," he went on, turning to Quest, "the spots where he could emerge from the tract of country are pretty well guarded, and he'll be in a fine mess, when he does put in an appearance, to show himself upon a public road. Yet by this time I should say he must be nigh starved. Sooner or later he'll have to come out for food. I've a little scheme of my own, sir, I don't mind admitting," the man concluded, with a twinkle in his keen brown eyes. "I'm not giving it away. If I catch him for you, that's all that's wanted, I imagine, and we shan't be any the nearer to it for letting anyone into my little secret."

His master nodded.

"You shall have your rise out of the police, if you can, Middleton," he observed. "It seems queer, though, to believe that the fellow's still in hiding round here."

They made their way, single file, to the road and up to the house. Lord Ashleigh did his best to dispel a queer little sensation of uneasiness which seemed to have arisen in the minds of all of them.

"Come," he said, "we must put aside our disappointment for the present, and remember that after all the chances are that Craig will never make his escape alive. Let us forget him for a little while. . . . Mr. Quest," he added, a few minutes later, as they reached the hall, "Moreton here will show you your room and look after you. I leave let me know if you will take an aperitif. I can recommend my sherry. We dine at eight o'clock. Edgar, you know your way. The blue room, of course. I am coming up with you myself. Her ladyship back yet, Moreton?"

"Not yet, my lord."

"Lady Ashleigh," her husband explained, "has gone to the other side of the county to open a bazaar. She is looking forward to the pleasure of welcoming you at dinner time."

Dinner, served, out of compliment to their transatlantic visitor, in the great banquet hall, was to Quest, especially, a most impressive meal. They sat at a small round table lit by shaded lights, in the center of an apartment which was large in reality, and which seemed vast by reason of the shadows which hovered around the unlit spaces. From the walls frowned down a long succession of family portraits—Ashleighs in the queer Tudor costume of Henry VII; Ashleighs in chain armor, sword in hand, a charger waiting, regardless of perspective, in the near distance; Ashleighs bearded and bearded; Ashleighs in the court dress of the Georges—Judges, sailors, statesmen and soldiers. A collection of armor which would have gladdened the eye of many an antiquarian, was ranged along the black-paneled walls.

Everything was in harmony, even the grave precision of the solemn-faced butler and the powdered hair of the two footmen. Quest, perhaps for the first time in his life, felt almost lost, hopelessly out of touch with his surroundings, and a struggling figure. Nevertheless, he entertained the little party with many stories. He struggled all the time against that queer sense of anachronism which now and then became almost oppressive.

The professor's pleasure at finding himself once more amongst these familiar surroundings was obvious and intense. The conversation between him and his brother never flagged. There were tenants and neighbors to be asked after, matters concerning the estate on which he demanded information. Even the very servants' names he remembered.

"It was a queer turn of fate, George," he declared, as he held out before him a wonderfully chased glass filled with amber wine, "which sent you into the world a few seconds before me and made you lord of Ashleigh and me a struggling scientific man."

"The world has benefited by it," Lord Ashleigh remarked, with more than fraternal courtesy. "We hear

great things of you over here, Edgar. We hear that you have been on the point of proving most unpleasant things with regard to our origin."

"Oh! there is no doubt about that," the professor observed. "Where we came from and where we are going to are questions which no longer afford room for the slightest doubt to the really scientific mind. What sometimes does elude us is the nature of our tendencies while we are here on earth."

There was a brief silence. The port had been placed upon the table and coffee served. The servants, according to the custom of the house, had departed. The great apartment was empty. Even Quest was impressed by some peculiar significance in the long-drawn-out silence. He looked around him uneasily. The growing regard of that long line of painted warriors seemed somehow to be full of menace. There was something grim, too, in the sight of those empty suits of armor.

"I may be superstitious," Lord Ashleigh said, "but there are times, especially just lately, when I seem to find a new and hateful quality in silence. What is it, I wonder? I ask you, but I think I know. It is the conviction that there is some alien presence, something disturbing, lurking close at hand."

He suddenly rose to his feet, pushed his chair back and walked to the window, which opened level with the ground. He threw it up and listened. The others came over and joined him. There was nothing to be heard but the distant hooting of an owl, and farther away the barking of some farmhouse dog. Lord Ashleigh stood there with straining eyes, gazing out across the park.

"There was something here," he muttered; "something which has gone. What's that? Quest, your eyes are younger than mine. Can you see anything underneath that tree?"

Quest peered out into the gray darkness.

"I fancied I saw something moving in the shadow of that oak," he muttered. "Wait."

He crossed the terrace, swung down on to the path, across the lawn, over a wire fence and into the park itself. All the time he kept his eyes fixed on a certain spot. When at last he reached the tree there was nothing there. He looked all around him. He stood and listened for several moments. A more utterly peaceful night or more utter peace it would be hard to imagine. Slowly he made his way back to the house.

(TO BE CONTINUED)



Showing the Quest Through Hamblin House.

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